

Maghreb Neutrality

Maghreb-Gulf Arab Ties Since the GCC Split

By Haim Malka

SUMMARY

One year since a diplomatic crisis split the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have maintained neutral positions towards the feud. In light of deepening ties between the Maghreb and GCC states—and the pressure by some Gulf regimes on their allies to choose sides—the Maghreb’s neutrality has been particularly notable. The ability of Maghreb governments to stay out of the crossfire of the intra-GCC conflict demonstrates pragmatism and confidence as well as the limits of GCC influence in the Maghreb.

The stakes were different for each Maghreb country in pursuing neutrality on the Gulf rift. At stake for Morocco were billions of dollars in aid and investment promised by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as diplomatic support for Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara, Rabat’s top foreign policy priority. For cash-strapped Tunisia, Gulf aid and investment are critical, but aligning with either side in the Gulf dispute would have jeopardized its single most important political achievement in the post-Ben Ali era—the political compromise between the Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes parties. Algeria’s financial independence and mistrust of external intervention has made it the least susceptible to GCC intervention and influence. Conflict-torn Libya is an outlier, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be an arena for GCC intervention and proxy struggles.

Gulf Arab-Maghreb ties will continue to matter for both sides. The Maghreb will continue to be dependent on Gulf aid and investment, and the Gulf will look to maintain strategic ties with its Maghreb partners. But moving forward, those ties will be shaped more by pragmatism and self-interest than political or ideological cohesion. ■

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hen Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) severed ties with Qatar on June 6, 2017, North African Maghreb governments were caught in a difficult position.¹ All three states had expanded aid and investment in the Maghreb since 2011, contributing to the stability of North African governments during a vulnerable period. The feud within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) threatened to disrupt those ties. Pressure mounted for Maghreb governments to choose sides, putting financial aid, investment, and political support from members of the GCC camps at risk.

Rather than succumb to the pressure of declaring allegiance to one side or the other, however, Maghreb governments have navigated a neutral course while protecting their national interests.² One year later, Maghreb governments have minimized the negative fallout of their neutrality while continuing to derive benefits from Gulf Arab ties. They have prioritized their own national interests above external agendas and sought to remain at a distance from conflicts in which Maghreb leaders feel they do not have a direct stake. Maghreb states have also given freer expression to policy differences with their Gulf Arab partners. The pragmatic course they have charted speaks to the growing confidence and autonomy of Maghreb governments, as well as the limits of GCC influence in the Maghreb.

GCC ENGAGEMENT IN THE MAGHREB

When uprisings began in Tunisia and spread across the Arab world beginning in late 2010, the Maghreb shifted from the margins of Arab politics to become one of its most dynamic focal points. Gulf Arab monarchies in particular saw peril emanating from the Maghreb, whose protests and revolutions threatened the region’s established political order.³

The threat of a tumultuous Maghreb also created opportunities for Gulf actors. Gulf monarchies—primarily Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—used their wealth to buy influence, build strategic alliances, reap economic dividends, and expand their regional clout. Over time, the Maghreb became an important arena where Gulf Arab interests overlapped but also clashed.

Increasingly, Gulf Arab engagement in the Maghreb exposed deeper policy splits within the GCC. Qatar openly promoted

political change and supported Islamist movements (while maintaining a tight grip on politics at home), while Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed counterrevolutionary forces and existing elites in a bid to blunt Islamists at the ballot box. Libya and Tunisia became the primary arenas of Gulf engagement and competition. In Morocco and Algeria, Gulf regimes angled for investments and business opportunities, as well as access to decisionmakers.

For Maghreb governments and political actors, newfound attention from Gulf Arab states carried rewards and risks.

Likewise for Maghreb governments and political actors, newfound attention from Gulf Arab states carried rewards and risks. They leveraged Gulf interest to increase financial aid, investment, and diplomatic support. Yet, securing Gulf assistance required commitments of solidarity that imposed costs for some Maghreb leaders. These included granting Gulf Arab partners favorable access to markets, a degree of political influence, aligning with particular Gulf Arab policy initiatives, and—in some cases—providing military support to increasingly ambitious GCC military campaigns elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Gulf's increased involvement in the region was not always popular in the Maghreb. The overwhelming need facing the region was to provide jobs for young people, but most Gulf investment flowed to sectors such as real estate that rewarded elites but created few jobs. In some cases, publics were suspicious of Gulf intentions, and debates about the GCC played out in the media across the Maghreb. Critics in the Maghreb claimed that Gulf proxies staked out extreme political positions and prolonged political turmoil, especially in Libya, which presents an ongoing security liability for Libya's neighbors.⁴

Despite sometimes pitched debates, Maghreb leaders encouraged GCC investments and assistance. Ties between every state in the Maghreb and the GCC deepened in the years following the Arab uprisings, driven both by the strategic interests of GCC states and the financial needs of governments in the Maghreb. Gulf Arab aid and investment have been critical for Morocco and Tunisia. While Algeria is more self-sufficient, it has sought to diversify its economy and attract greater foreign investment, especially in the

hydrocarbon sector.⁵ A wide spectrum of Libyan political factions and militias have benefited from direct Gulf Arab aid. Yet, as Gulf Arab states' own divisions have deepened in the last year, North African leaders have found themselves in the cross-winds of intra-GCC competition.

BALANCING CONVERGING AND DIVERGING INTERESTS

The stakes are different for each Maghreb country in pursuing neutrality on the Gulf rift. To be sure, Gulf trade and investment, primarily from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have been critical for every Maghreb state. These ties helped mask lingering policy tensions between governments in the Maghreb and their GCC partners that were often intentionally overlooked by both parties for the sake of the overt benefits provided by strategic ties.

Saudi Arabia's longstanding support for salafi religious and social institutions across the Maghreb, the Saudi and Emirati conflict with Iran, Qatari support for Islamists, including militant salafists, and the Saudi-led war in Yemen are all Gulf policy issues that diverge from Maghreb governments' interests to varying degrees. Maghreb governments are also concerned that Qatari and Emirati support for warring sides of the conflict in Libya exacerbates the country's instability. Meanwhile, the willingness of regimes in Morocco and Tunisia to hold free elections and allow Islamist political parties to head governments has been a source of ongoing frustration and concern for Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The severity of the Saudi and Emirati-led Quartet's boycott of Qatar threatened to disrupt Maghreb governments' network of ties with GCC members. In the immediate aftermath of the schism, pressure mounted for Saudi and Emirati allies to publicly display their allegiances by joining the diplomatic blockade. Egypt and Bahrain, both heavily dependent on Emirati and Saudi financial support, immediately joined the blockade. Chad, Senegal, and Mauritania—countries on the Maghreb's periphery—all broke diplomatic ties with Qatar, while Jordan downgraded its relations. Maghreb governments responded to these pressures more cautiously, and did so differently than other countries with Gulf ties.

Morocco's surprising balance

For Morocco, the only monarchy in the Maghreb, bonds with Gulf Arab monarchies are a longstanding and critical source of support. This was reinforced in mid-2011 when the GCC floated an invitation to Morocco (and Jordan) to

join the group of Gulf monarchies and pledged \$5 billion in aid to promote Moroccan stability.⁶ Given the depth and importance of Morocco's ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular, its neutrality in the Qatar dispute was surprising. At stake for Morocco were billions of dollars in aid and investment promised by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as diplomatic support for Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, Rabat's top foreign policy priority. Had the Qatar feud occurred several years earlier, Morocco's position may have veered toward more open alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Morocco's ties to Saudi Arabia and the UAE stretch back decades. They include robust relationships between ruling families as well as flows of aid, investment, and diplomatic support. In return, Morocco provided strategic and military support for its Gulf allies. Since the 1980s, Moroccans have been stationed in the UAE to assist with domestic security; and during the 1991 Gulf War, Morocco sent 1,200 troops to Saudi Arabia. Morocco later joined Gulf states in the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State group (ISG) coalition in Syria and as a member of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition in December 2015. It also joined Saudi and Emirati-led military operations in Yemen. In 2015, the UAE and Morocco signed a military cooperation agreement that included UAE command of six Moroccan F-16 fighter jets participating in coalition operations. Saudi Arabia has also sought to shore up Morocco's military, in which it reportedly pledged to invest \$22 billion in 2015.⁷

Morocco's Gulf ties run deepest with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but Qatari-Moroccan ties have also advanced in the last several years. Qatari imports of Moroccan goods have increased and Qatar has become the fourth-largest source of foreign direct investment to Morocco (after France, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia), including in the real estate, tourism, banking, energy, and infrastructure sectors.⁸ Morocco's political and business elite, including those close to the palace, have been active in courting Qatari investment. Moreover, Morocco's Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (PJD) which has headed the government since November 2011, found a natural ally in Qatar and helped develop closer ties between the two countries.⁹

Qatari ties provide some strategic benefits that align with Moroccan policy goals. On the energy front, Morocco is in the midst of a multiyear energy plan which seeks to increase its use of natural gas—a resource of which Qatar is the world's leading producer—for power and industry. Qatar is a leading candidate for supplying Morocco's growing natural gas needs,¹⁰ and has recently invested in other areas of Morocco's energy sector.¹¹ In 2015, Royal

Air Maroc and Qatar Airways agreed to code sharing agreements on various West African routes, and more recently Qatari firms have sought to use Morocco as an African hub to expand shari'a-compliant banking on the continent.¹² Qatar's potential to play a balancing role to Morocco's dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially as a source of investment and energy partner, gives Morocco an incentive to maintain neutrality in the Gulf feud.

All sides have to balance tensions and occasionally adopt tactical measures to compensate for strategic differences.

Morocco's ties with Qatar have advanced as policy differences between Morocco and its other Gulf partners grew, especially over the war in Yemen. After a Moroccan F-16 was shot down in Yemen in mid-2015,¹³ Moroccan discontent with Saudi and Emirati war aims grew. Morocco quietly withdrew its F-16s and reportedly its troops operating in Yemen.¹⁴

In Libya, Emirati support for military strongman Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) undermined Morocco's efforts to broker a Libyan political agreement. More broadly, Saudi Arabia and Qatar's support for salafi movements and Wahhabi practice across the region has been at odds with Morocco's efforts to strengthen its own traditions of Moroccan Islam based on the Maliki legal school and emphasizing Sufism.

Morocco has been willing to overlook differences for the sake of deeper strategic partnerships. However, these policy tensions have lingered in the background. When the Qatar feud erupted in June 2017, Morocco's king offered to mediate the dispute and announced that Morocco would play a "constructive and neutral" role.¹⁵ Early in the crisis, Morocco sent a shipment of food to Qatar after Saudi Arabia blocked imports. In November, Morocco's King Mohammed VI made an official visit to Abu Dhabi and then flew to Doha to urge reconciliation.

While ties remain strong, Saudi and Emirati displeasure at Morocco's neutrality has not gone unnoticed. In June 2017, the UAE's anger towards Morocco's neutrality was on display when Abu Dhabi TV aired a report about Morocco with a map that omitted Western Sahara as part of Morocco.

More recently, Saudi Arabia has expressed support for the U.S. bid to host the World Cup tournament over Morocco's bid.¹⁶ It is possible to overstate the importance of these gestures or overinterpret them, and some commentators question their significance.¹⁷ What is more striking is that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have not taken punitive actions against Morocco for its neutrality such as serious moves to cancel trade or investment agreements.

Instead, all sides have to balance tensions and occasionally adopt tactical measures to compensate for strategic differences. For example, in May 2018, Morocco cut ties with Iran and recalled its ambassador from Tehran, accusing Hezbollah of supplying military aid to Polisario rebels via the Iranian embassy in Algiers.¹⁸ The move to eject Iran's small diplomatic presence was part of Morocco's ongoing feud with Algeria, but it was also likely linked to efforts to repair tense ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (as well as the Trump administration). Morocco's partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar will remain important components of Rabat's foreign policy. Yet, Morocco's broader interests are advanced by maintaining neutrality in the GCC feud rather than choosing sides that embroil the country in external conflicts.

Tunisia's compromise

Tunisia's turbulent politics after the fall of Ben Ali created openings for Gulf Arab and other external actors to influence the country's political trajectory. For Gulf Arab monarchies, Tunisia's transition from authoritarianism to representative government posed a direct threat, and they sought to minimize the threat by influencing the post-Ben Ali order. Gulf regimes were also concerned by the large number of Tunisians joining al Qaeda and the ISG in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. The UAE openly backed forces associated with the old regime that eventually coalesced into the Nidaa Tounes party, while Qatar provided aid and support to the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Ennahda movement.

For the Tunisian government, economic priorities are the top concern. Meeting budgets, expanding economic growth, attracting investment, and creating jobs are all directly and intimately tied to the demands of the revolution and mandate of post-revolutionary governments. In this respect, Gulf governments were a lifeline through the provision of critical budgetary support, loans, and other types of aid.

Qatar's early support shored up Tunisia's Islamist-led transitional governments after the fall of Ben Ali; in 2012 alone, Doha pledged more than \$1.5 billion in loans. At a 2016 donor conference, the Emir of Qatar pledged another

\$1.25 billion in economic aid over five years.¹⁹ At the same conference, Saudi Arabia pledged \$575 million in loans.²⁰ According to Qatari officials, the country invested nearly \$1 billion in Tunisia between 2014 and 2017.²¹ In 2017, Qatar loaned Tunisia \$998 million according to the IMF.²² The UAE has also been an important investor in Tunisia, including in the services and telecommunications sectors.

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Despite the importance of Gulf aid and assistance, aligning with either side in the Gulf dispute would have jeopardized Tunisia's single most important political achievement in the post-Ben Ali era—the political compromise between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. The compromise has been critical to maintaining Tunisia's stability in a turbulent period. Without it, spiraling political conflict could have created a number of unforeseen challenges, deepened Tunisia's economic woes, and further destabilized a precarious security situation. Although there is no direct evidence that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Qatar attempted to prevent Tunisia's compromise, the arrangement's durability partly reflects Tunisians' determination to avoid becoming a venue for proxy competitions between Gulf rivals.

Tunisia's strong ties with the United States, Europe, and international lenders have helped prevent it from becoming overly dependent on any one external actor. For example, the United States has provided \$750 million in assistance and underwritten nearly \$1.5 billion in loan guarantees to Tunisia since 2011.²³ Europe has also been an important source of aid and attention, allowing Tunisia to diversify its sources of support.

Despite having a stake in Tunisia's transition, GCC actors have abandoned attempts to mold Tunisia's political direction in favor of maintaining close ties with various

actors. While political and social cleavages still run deep in Tunisia, external forces will find it difficult to exploit these differences to promote their own independent agendas as long as the political compromise built by Tunisia's political leadership endures.

Algeria's steady position

Algeria's financial independence and mistrust of external intervention made it the least susceptible to GCC intervention and influence. Its neutral stance on the intra-GCC schism was thus a natural position, and the Algerian senior leadership's call for all sides to resolve their conflict came as no surprise.

The modern Algerian state has been impatient with the regional status quo since an eight-year war won it independence from France in 1962. Algeria has long enjoyed historic ties with Russia, China, and Iran, and it has bridled at the Saudis' and Emiratis' close ties to Morocco, Algeria's regional rival.

In addition, Algeria's historically hawkish position on OPEC oil production levels has often put it at odds with Saudi Arabia's more conservative oil pricing strategy. Support by Saudi Arabia and Qatar alike for Islamist movements and charities across the region has long been a point of contention for Algeria, which fought a bloody civil war against Islamists in the 1990s. On balance, however, the Algerians have found more commonality with Qatar than with more conservative forces in the Gulf.

Despite cool GCC-Algerian relations in the past, ties have improved considerably in the last several years. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have all sought investment opportunities in Algeria, aligning with Algeria's interest in expanding industrial output and economic diversification. Qatar has invested nearly \$2 billion in a steel plant in eastern Algeria and approximately \$600 million in the banking, real estate, and tourism sectors.²⁴ In June 2017, Algeria's state hydrocarbon firm Sonatrach awarded Dubai's Dodsal a contract to establish a \$1 billion gas-oil separation plant.²⁵

This investment has muted Algeria's opposition to what it sees as external Gulf intervention in its neighborhood, primarily in Libya and the Sahel. In Libya, Algeria has generally promoted a broader dialogue between warring factions, and has resented the UAE's military intervention and support for Khalifa Haftar.²⁶ It has equally resented Qatar's military intervention in support of the initial NATO campaign to oust Muammar el-Qaddafi, as well as its aid for anti-Qaddafi revolutionaries and various Islamists since Qaddafi's fall.²⁷

Algeria has also been frustrated by Saudi support for salafists and the spread of Wahhabi practice in Mali and the Sahel.²⁸ More recently, Algiers has opposed greater Saudi and Emirati intervention in the Sahel, particularly the two countries' support for the G-5 Sahel Joint Force backed by France.²⁹ In December 2017, the UAE pledged approximately \$37 million to the G-5 Sahel Joint Force, while Saudi Arabia pledged more than \$100 million.³⁰ Algeria views this support as unnecessary meddling by external forces in the internal affairs of the region. Beyond the Sahel, Algeria is wary of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's growing economic and military roles in Africa.

Libya divided

Gulf Arab competition did not create Libya's present conflict, but Gulf backing for rival proxy forces has contributed to prolonging Libya's political fragmentation. For a brief moment in 2011, Qatar and the UAE shared broad goals of ousting Qaddafi from power. Now, competing Libyan factions are pledging loyalty to their various Gulf backers, which is further complicating efforts by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) to organize elections and build a credible government.³¹ The GNA has struggled with legitimacy from its inception and its practical authority in most of the country is limited. Ultimately, GCC support for different political-military factions is providing the means for those actors, including Haftar, to dig into their positions rather than seek political compromise. This external support further undermines the GNA's legitimacy and raises the threat of more direct military confrontation.

Libya will need a moment of Gulf consensus similar to their brief alignment against Qaddafi in 2011 to help bridge Libya's many fault lines and move actors toward political compromise. While many of Libya's divisions predate Gulf intervention, Gulf states' importance as backers of Libya's warring factions mean that a Gulf Arab understanding will likely be necessary as a prerequisite for Libyan parties to the conflict to reach accommodation.

IMPLICATIONS

By taking a neutral stand on the Gulf feud, Maghreb governments have displayed a growing confidence in their stability, and they have become more assertive in promoting their national interests. Debates over GCC involvement in the Maghreb have brought into focus areas of interdependence between the Gulf and the Maghreb, but also demonstrated the limits of Gulf influence in the Maghreb. This leverage has allowed Maghreb governments

to create some distance between themselves and the policies of GCC regimes that diverge from their own interests.

Maghreb governments' confidence stems in part from their increasing sense that the threats to their rule in the early days of the Arab uprisings have decreased to manageable levels. To be sure, the grievances that sparked the Arab uprisings still exist and social protests are still rampant across the region, posing an ongoing challenge to every regime. However, for the moment, the descent of Libya and Syria into devastating conflicts has dissuaded both governments and protestors from escalating contestation towards more extreme or violent confrontations that would be difficult to unwind.

Maghreb governments, especially Morocco and Tunisia, will need external assistance to address socioeconomic grievances and disparities. Yet while Gulf aid and investment would be difficult to replace, Gulf states' utility to Maghreb governments in achieving Maghreb states' strategic objectives and priorities is limited, and it is unclear what additional benefits Maghreb governments could derive from openly siding with either party in the Gulf dispute.

Other Arab countries have not possessed the same leverage as Maghreb governments to chart a neutral position. Egypt and Bahrain, for example, are much more dependent on Saudi Arabia and the UAE for financial support. In Egypt's case, Qatar's strong backing of the Muslim Brotherhood government also puts it directly at odds with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In Somalia, the federal government's neutral stance has provoked a strong backlash in federal states that depend on the UAE, deepening Somalia's internal conflict.³² Given the way some Gulf states have pressured their partners into taking sides, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco's neutrality is even more remarkable.

LOOKING FORWARD

One year since the blockade of Qatar, the Gulf Arab feud shows no signs of being resolved. The impact of the split has been felt far beyond the borders of the GCC. For the Maghreb, the GCC feud exposed not only deeper rifts within the GCC, but also tension between Maghreb governments and their GCC partners over policy differences.

Rather than openly choose sides, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco took the opportunity to stake out independent positions and assert their own interests separate from those of their Gulf partners. These governments managed to stay out of the intra-GCC dispute in a way that may have

been less feasible from their more vulnerable positions in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings in 2011 and 2012. Their neutral positions demonstrate both pragmatism and confidence, while still creating some distance over policies Maghreb leaders feel undermine their interests. Libya remains the exception, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be an arena for GCC intervention and proxy struggles.

For Gulf Arab regimes, the Maghreb's strategic importance has not waned.

For Gulf Arab regimes, the Maghreb's strategic importance has not waned. With wars still raging in Syria and Yemen, ongoing conflict with Iran, and increased unpredictability of U.S. policy, maintaining strategic alliances with the Maghreb continues to be critical for Gulf Arab regimes. Although GCC governments occasionally publicly show their displeasure through symbolic actions, they have refrained from punishing their Maghreb partners in a way that threatens strategic ties or could destabilize Maghreb regimes. Ultimately, Gulf Arab interests lie in stable Maghreb regimes.

At the same time, the Maghreb remains important to GCC countries' economic strategies. Gulf Arab investment is targeted to optimize the returns of investors, and Gulf Arab firms will likely continue looking for opportunities in the Maghreb, while they have also expanded investments in Africa, Asia, and other arenas. For Morocco and Algeria, for whom sub-Saharan Africa is a major foreign policy priority, increasing Gulf involvement in Africa creates the potential for both competition and cooperation. How Maghreb states manage greater GCC engagement in Africa in particular will become another important factor shaping bilateral relations.

Gulf Arab-Maghreb ties will continue to matter for both sides. The Maghreb will continue to be dependent on Gulf aid and investment and the Gulf will look to maintain strategic ties with its Maghreb partners. But moving forward, those ties will be shaped more by pragmatism and self-interest than political or ideological cohesion. For the Maghreb, that growing autonomy is an important step forward. ■

ENDNOTES

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